AFFIRMING CATHOLICISM

Peter Hinchliff

HISTORY, TRADITION AND CHANGE

Church History and the Development of Doctrine

Series Editor: Jeffrey John

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Introduction

'Traditional' is a word that is often used to mean 'conservative' or 'orthodox' as opposed to 'new' or 'liberal'. Tradition obviously has something to do with history, as it is that which has been handed on from generation to generation in the life of the Church. It also plainly has something to do with change, or the absence of it. The aim of this paper[1] is to explore what we mean by 'tradition' and how it relates to both history and change. This will not simply have practical consequences for the life of the Church here and now; it will also help to establish a very important issue of principle related to the nature of history. We should, because it affects our integrity, take the trouble to understand the nature of history in order to understand what tradition is, and then decide whether we are to class ourselves as 'traditionalists'. It is not enough to say, naively, 'I like the old ways of doing things therefore I am a traditionalist.'

So in this paper I will first of all explore the nature of history, taking note of the ways in which we have come to see, in the last 150 years, that history is a much more complex thing than was once thought. For example, we now understand that ideas do not pass through history unchanged: the historical context in which people live affects the way they think and thus the ideas which they express. Even when they seem to be using the same words as people of a previous generation they do not necessarily mean the same things by them. I shall therefore suggest that 'an unchanging tradition' is a contradiction in terms. The challenge is to assess whether ideas, though changing, can remain faithful to the original principles.

I will suggest, in exploring this issue, that there are parallels between historical and cross-cultural transmission. In both cases it would appear that the only way anyone can judge the faithfulness of the transmission is through sympathetic personal understanding of those who have received the tradition. And it is those who receive it who have to devise their own way of formulating the tradition. Certainly in the early Church, when Christianity was passed from a Jewish to a Hellenistic culture, it was those who received the tradition who had to decide how to express the faith they had inherited. If these parallels hold true then it is the present generation which has to have the courage to make its own judgements about what is the proper way to express tradition now. And if there is, as I would argue, no infallible test which can be worked out in advance and applied in principle, our only guide is a patient and sympathetic understanding of history and a strong sense of integrity.

The modern understanding of the nature of history

The University of Oxford possesses a very elegant portrait[2] of Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, who was the regius professor of ecclesiastical history from 1857 to 1864. He was also everybody's *beau ideal*. Dr Arnold, the famous headmaster of Rugby, thought Stanley to have been the very best of the boys who had been through the school in his time. Arnold was judging, of course, by his own Broad Church standards which laid much more emphasis upon morals than dogma. Stanley was the kind of upright, manly, honest, truthful Christian boy that Arnold hoped Rugby would produce. And Stanley, in turn, wrote Arnold's biography after his premature death in 1842, which gave him plenty of opportunity to express his admiration for his former headmaster.[3]

Stanley was the quintessential liberal who would die for everybody else's right to their own beliefs, even though he rarely agreed with those who held really dangerous opinions. He declined to contribute to a radical collection of theological articles called *Essays and Reviews*, published in 1860, because he thought it an ill-conceived venture, but he was willing to make public defence of the essayists. When Bishop Colenso published his critical work on the Pentateuch, also in the 1860s, Stanley was vigorously opposed to many of his conclusions. But he refused to allow the first Lambeth Conference to use Westminster Abbey, of which he had become dean in 1864, for fear that it might take some action against Colenso.

Stanley was so charming, so courtly, so much above reproach, so much the perfect gentleman in the estimation of everybody from Queen Victoria down, that it was difficult for his opponents to find credible but harsh things to say of him. Probably the most savage criticism he was ever subjected to was in an anonymous attack which characterized him as a 'light horseman' whose 'type of mind was so palpably shallow' that he took 'an active part in many a hot battle' without exciting permanent animosity.[4]

Stanley was not a great historian, though he told a story well. His Broad Church liberalism showed itself chiefly in the fact that he told the stories of 'sacred history' in the same style as any others, as human stories, in fact. This did not prevent his mixing some historically dubious tales with more reliable material. In what he had to say about Moses, for instance, in his *History of the Jewish Church* he 'interweaves legends with biblical data in

his usual picturesque fashion'.[5] And he possessed a 'lively imagination, even if accuracy was apt to elude him'.

> He was better at popular history . . . or historical travelogues such as *Sinai and Palestine* (1856). All these works have a certain charm, 'period' though it now is. Their chief fault is an excess of colour, a too florid eloquence.[6]

It has to be said, in Stanley's defence, that he would probably have argued that it was important for him to present Church history in such a manner. When he was first appointed to the chair he gave a course of no less than three inaugural lectures in which he complained that the greatest problem facing an ecclesiastical historian was the 'repulsively' boring nature of his discipline.

> We seem to be set down in the valley of the Prophet [Ezekiel]'s vision, – strewn with bones, and behold they are 'very many', and 'very dry'; skeletons of creeds, of churches, of institutions; trodden and traversed by the feet of travellers again and again; the scapegoat of one age lying lifeless by the scapegoat of the next; rusty controversies, 'of which the locks have been turned so often that they can now neither be opened nor shut'; craters of extinct volcanoes, which once filled the world with their noise, and are now dead and cold; the salt shores of a barren sea, which throws up again dead and withered the branches which the river of life had cast into it [when they were] full of beauty and verdure, . . . How are we to give interest to such a task – how shall those dry bones live?[7]

Stanley appears to have had some reason for thinking that his students were bored. At the end of his first full year in office, surveying the numbers who had been to his lectures, he thought that only one person had been to the full course.[8] And he added, 'I wish to record the remarkable indications of apparent inattention . . .'.[9] Not everyone, however, was bored by his lectures. Though the candidates for the ministry were neither conscientious about attendance nor very alert once they got there, Stanley recorded with some pride that several hundred came to his public lectures. His 'lively imagination' and 'florid eloquence' were attractive to a fairly wide audience.

Stanley was, of course, being disingenuous in describing his own discipline as 'repulsive'. He believed that it was theology which ruined Church history by making it boring. And he thought that, if theology was a problem for ecclesiastical history, there was a very simple way to tackle it. What he called 'the history of doctrines and opinions' would cease to be repulsively boring, 'if we view them through the medium of the lives, characters, and circumstances of those who received and taught them'.[10] The effect for which he strove can best be appreciated in his advice that the General Councils of the early Church should be taught as 'the pitched battles of Ecclesiastical History. Ask yourselves the same questions as you would about the battles of military history.'[11]

Stanley was teaching Church history in the middle of the nineteenth century. By his day it was no longer really enough for ecclesiastical historians to approach their subject as if it were simply a ripping yarn, and to do him justice even Stanley saw that boredom was not the only problem. History was coming to be perceived as a much more complex and 'scientific' discipline, with philosophical overtones that often presented the theologian with problems. In Germany, almost a century earlier than Stanley's time, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who was the son of a Lutheran pastor and became one of the fathers of Liberal Protestant thinking, had already dug his 'broad ugly ditch' between history and theology. He argued that it was much more important to search for truth, disinterestedly and for its own sake, than to be given some ultimate and absolute truth. Therefore he thought that the traditional Christian view that the final and absolute truth about God was revealed in Jesus was misguided. Reason should prefer to pursue the truth. But the necessary truths of reason (in effect the truths of mathematics and logic and, perhaps, moral truths too) could not possibly be proved by the facts of history, which are, in a sense, accidental. It does not follow that, if a particular event turns out in a particular way, similar events must turn out in the same way. Still less can one deduce eternal verities from the events of history. How can the life of Jesus of Nazareth, then, be the vehicle for truths about the eternal God?

If Lessing was right, Christianity could not be an historical religion in the way that had been supposed, for Christians had always maintained that their religion was an historical religion, in the sense that it was based on real events and therefore different from the 'myths' which were said to be the stuff of other religions. It had not been perceived that, if it were an historical religion, Christianity would be subject to the limitations as well as the advantages of historicity.

The whole question of cause and effect in historical events illustrates the growing complexity of historical understanding very well. And our own attempts to understand history probably echo the way in which historians have grappled with the problem. One of the first things we learn about history is that events have causes. We absorb the lesson quite unconsciously and, probably, those who teach it to us are as unconscious of teaching it as we are of learning it. 'What are the causes of the French Revolution?', we are asked. Without overmuch agonizing about the relationship between cause and effect, we answer that it happened *because* all wealth, all power and all privilege belonged to an aristocracy, which also escaped any corresponding burden of responsibility. It simply seems to us fairly obvious that the one thing *caused* the other.

Further consideration, however, may suggest that we have jumped to an

unjustified conclusion and that causation, in the normal sense in which we use the word, may not be applicable to history. Compare, for instance, the way causation is used in talking of a scientific experiment – in which the action of one element upon another produces a repeatable, testable result. Whenever hydrochloric acid is poured on to zinc granules it causes a chemical reaction. The relationship between oppression and revolution is obviously much more tenuous and difficult to describe than that. A revolution does not happen every time oppression reaches a certain measurable intensity. If the operation of the supposed cause is not clear and precise, can we be sure that it is a cause and that the 'effect' has not happened by sheer chance? It begins to seem that language of cause and effect is rather vague when we are discussing history. And if it is difficult to trace accurately and precisely the effect of one event directly upon another, it must be even more difficult to talk about the effects of a single historical event upon a large and abstract concept like human nature.

Yet Christianity claims that the death of Jesus redeems the human race: that seems to be the language of cause and effect. But historical events possess a particularity. They belong to a specific time and place. They are themselves. They do not repeat themselves. They are unique. How then can they have a universal significance?

There was also the question as to how an 'historical' religion could be related to a God who could not be confined within time and space? In metaphysical terms, of course, that was no new question. Orthodox Christian teaching about Jesus Christ, that he was fully God and fully man, had raised this problem very acutely from at least the fourth century. How could someone be both a mortal human being and divine God at the same time? And, in a sense, all the problems raised by the doctrine of the incarnation were also implicit in the doctrine of creation. How could an unchangeable, unmoved God create a world which had a beginning and which he loved? But the question was now being asked in terms of an understanding of history perceived as a *process*. What would it mean to believe that God's actions were tied into that process in the same way as human actions were? And if they were not, how could they be real events of history?

The methods used to determine truth by the new critical, so-called 'scientific' history raised another kind of problem for theologians. They had been used to telling the story of God's dealings with the human race and the world in a certain way, in which a theological interpretation of events had been presented as though it were as simple and factual as the events themselves. The new critical historical methods required new standards: a reliance upon factual truth; a careful, critical sifting of the evidence; complete impartiality from the

historian; and an awareness of the relative character of one's own norms and values.

This critical approach seemed particularly to raise all sorts of questions about the element of the miraculous in the Christian story and, moreover, nineteenth century historians came to realize that the things that they now knew about the universe and its components, as a result of the new scientific discoveries, had always been true. Earlier generations had not known about them. They had not understood the scientific laws that were now generally accepted. They had not known about gravity and density and matters of that sort. They had told and repeated stories about people floating upwards or walking on water, without realizing that these things were not just remarkable and unusual, but actually 'impossible'. The nineteenth century historian, however, could not simply report a miraculous explanation offered for an event by his source, as if he shared his source's ignorance. He must either, at least tacitly, disown his source's explanation or offer some account of it which recognized its 'impossibility'.

We have become used, by the late twentieth century, to talking about that crisis for faith which was the consequence of the new *scientific* discoveries of the nineteenth century, yet – on the whole – theology has come to terms with the natural sciences. It has never done so well with the crisis for faith which was and has been the consequence of the new history of the nineteenth century. In 1884 the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Frederick Temple, delivered his Bampton Lectures on *The Relations between Religion and Science*. These lectures, as Owen Chadwick has pointed out, 'assumed evolution as an axiom'.[12] When Temple was nominated to the archbishopric the only protest came from a clergyman who had resigned his living *because* he had come to think the evolutionary hypothesis to be correct. Since there was no protest from anyone who was an opponent of evolution on religious grounds, Chadwick concludes:

> This trivial little incident may be taken to mark the final acceptance of the doctrine of evolution among the divines, clergy and leading laity of the established church, at least as a doctrine permissible and respectable in an eminent clergyman.

If he is right about this, it had taken just 37 years since the publication of Darwin's work in 1859 for the Church to come to terms with his hypothesis. A hundred years later the way in which even the clergy think about the relationship between *history* and faith remains often naive in the extreme.

Ideas do not pass through history unchanged

A good instance of this persisting naivety can be seen in the way in which people today discuss an issue that was dealt with in Cardinal Newman's *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, first published about 150 years ago.[13] Newman's *Essay* raised a serious question arising out of the relationship between faith and history. It was not a question which received much attention in the various things done to mark the centenary of his death in 1990. Yet it is plainly not a new question and if we are going to talk about the importance of tradition, we ought to be aware of its implications. Newman's problem was this: 'If a religion is historical, it must itself possess a history. That is to say it has progressed through time and exists in time. But to exist in time, means to exist by changing and developing. How can one be sure, then, that contemporary Christianity is still the same religion as that which was founded by Christ and his apostles?'

Newman's own proposed answer is not, perhaps, one of his most successful ventures into theology. The argument is frankly unconvincing. One cannot even be sure that it is an argument. Newman produced a drastically revised version of the *Essay* in 1878. Newman scholars seem to agree that the two versions of the *Essay* are chiefly different from each other in *arrangement*.[14] Newman had done, in other words, an extensive and complicated scissors-and-paste job on the text without really altering, or intending to alter, its meaning. But an argument is meant to start from a premise and go through logical, orderly stages until it arrives at a conclusion. One is, therefore, bound to ask oneself whether this can be an *argument* at all if so much of it could be so drastically cut up and moved about and stuck together again, without that having any real effect.

Moreover, the tests Newman devised for distinguishing between true and false developments are unworkable. One of them is that true development will have a conservative effect. But when Newman deals with the point he argues that, in nature, everything grows, matures and then decays. But this actually contradicts the point that he wishes to make, that there is some growth which is not corruption. Fairly frequently he seems to have difficulty in finding analogies for the characteristic he wishes to describe and so chooses ways of illustrating its opposite. One can then only grasp his point through

his assertion that the truth is *not* like this or that, which is a confusing way of proceeding. When he does provide a positive example it often smacks somewhat of special pleading. The examples he gives of 'corruptions' are not always self-evidently such nor are his examples of 'true' development manifestly more faithful to primitive Christianity. Sometimes one simply feels that he has written nonsense, as in the seventh test, when he says that heresies are necessarily short-lived. Many of the beliefs which Newman would have regarded as undeniably heretical have existed for a very long time. Plainly it is very far from easy to devise some means of testing the legitimacy of developments in principle.

The truth of the essay, however, is not a truth of logic. It is a truth of poetry, and I think Newman has to be treated here as if he were a poet. (This should not be taken too literally. Newman, when he tried to write verse, did not always have the poet's sureness of touch. I suppose that hymns are seldom great poetry but there can be few lines more banal than 'God is three and God is one.') Newman is like a poet in that poets have a way of saying things that no one has said before but, at the same time, seem to be what *we* have *always* thought. When one reads Newman's idea of development – that doctrine grows and changes from one generation to another, but can still be true to the original form – one says to oneself, 'Of course that *must* be true.' And one recognizes it as a general truth, not simply as something which applies to Christian doctrine alone. It could be true of John Smith's Labour Party, which has to be different from Keir Hardie's yet may be completely faithful to early Labour ideals. At any rate it is not a meaningless question to ask whether, in a different form and a different context, the modern Labour Party is being true to its origins.

An unchanging tradition is a contradiction in terms

Newman's achievement may best be appreciated by comparing his ideas with those of the Tractarians who continued to follow Dr Pusey's line. Pusey believed that tradition consisted of actual verbal formulations which could not be altered. When it was proposed that Oxford University should introduce a school of theology, for instance, Pusey was opposed to its including any study of the *history* of doctrine. Doctrine, he believed, could have no history, for the faith one ought to believe now is the same faith that was once delivered to the saints.[15] When his disciple, H.P. Liddon, was minded to make concessions to contemporary thought and include in his Bampton Lectures of 1866 a suggestion that Jesus might have been as limited in his ordinary knowledge as any other young Jew of his day, Pusey was deeply shocked. He persuaded Liddon to omit the suggestion.[16] The lectures, in the end, took the very hard line Pusey preferred, that if Jesus was mistaken or limited in what he knew, then he was not God.[17] The only kind of development Liddon was prepared to admit was one in which 'an old truth is vindicated by an explanatory reassertion'. This, he thought, had happened, for instance, when the Council of Nicea in 325 AD had added the word *homoousion* ('of one substance') to the creed. And such an explanatory assertion, once made, became for him 'a perfect criterion of real belief'.[18] It was fixed and immutable. It could never again be restated except, as it were, by a literal translation into the language of a new generation. One has only to compare this inflexible view, expressed twenty years after the publication of Newman's *Essay* by a much younger man, to see how creative his idea of development was.

Nevertheless it is extraordinary how frequently our own contemporaries side with Liddon rather than Newman. The controversy over the ordination of women, which is convulsing the Church of England, is a controversy about precisely the same question which Newman confronted – if faith exists within time, and therefore changes, how can one be sure that contemporary Christianity is still the same religion? And there remains a widespread belief that being faithful to tradition means that nothing must change, that doctrine must not develop.

Such a position is not only naive but actually untenable. In a sermon

preached in 1991 the archdeacon of York is said to have made two chief points:
first, he complained that 'liberals' within the Church of England were demanding the ordination of women as part of a general determination to abandon the unchanging traditional faith and morality of the Church;
secondly, he proposed that the way to deal with this tendency was to divide the Church of England into two segments, the 'traditional' and the 'liberal', without actually breaking apart its present single structure.[19] What is interesting is that if one turns once more to the tradition and looks to see what the great exponents of the doctrine of the oneness of the Holy Catholic Church had to say about it, one is left with the impression that the archdeacon's concept of unity is one to make St Cyprian or St Athanasius spin in their graves. Even the most determined of traditionalists, in other words, are tacitly recognizing that some things have to change when and if an historical religion is to move through history. Harnack was plainly right to say:

> There are only two possibilities . . . either the Gospel is in all respects identical with its earliest form, in which case it came with its time and has departed with it; or else it contains something which under differing historical forms is of permanent validity.[20]

The problem is to know whether that which appears under the differing historical forms is being faithful to the original.

Is the idea of 'legitimate change' historically naive?

Of course, naivety in things historical is terribly difficult to avoid altogether. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Liberal Protestants sought what they called the 'historical Jesus', the actual Jesus who had once existed in a par-ticular time and place. They hoped that they would then determine precisely what could properly be said about him theologically. That hope disappeared under the crushing blow of Albert Schweitzer's *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* of 1906 (published in English in 1910 as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*).

The Questers (those who sought the historical Jesus) may be regarded as the Pre-Raphaelites of history-as-a-theological-problem. They thought they were realists but were actually romantics. John Everett Millais's 'Ophelia' of 1851 is said to depict 57 varieties of plant, chosen for their symbolic character, but painted in precise botanical detail. His 'sitter' was also required to lie in a bath of water, to the very great detriment of her health. In that sense the picture is realism. But someone who has confronted despair and threatening insanity in some actual young person may well feel that, in order to picture innocence, Millais has romanticized it all.

Similarly, the Questers protested against what they thought of as the unreality of the way the Gospel story was usually understood. Dare one say that it was for them too much 'in the grand manner'. They were striking a blow for historical realism when they insisted that the temptations of Christ took place in his mind and not physically on a pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem[21]: it seemed to make the event more like the reality of their own experience. Their naivety lay in their assumption that the Jesus of history would be a civilized liberal.

Does this stripping away of the layers of naivety mean that we are separated by an enormous gulf from the way things were understood at the first? Denis Nineham once asked, '. . . is it any longer worthwhile to attempt to trace the Christian's ever-changing understanding of his relationship with God directly back to some identifiable element in the life, character and activity of Jesus of Nazareth?'[22] Are ways of thinking so different now that it is actually impossible for us even to know whether the Christianity we profess is faithful to the original?

Parallels between historical and cross-cultural transmission

I am not entirely pessimistic. This is largely because I am interested in the history of Christian missions as well as in the history of nineteenth century British theology. I am often reminded that the gap between one age and another is very like the gap between one culture and another. In fact the gap between one age and another is just as much a cultural gap (as every parent knows) as is the gap between one people, one kind of society, and another. And what we learn in trying to bridge one kind of gap may be useful in bridging the other kind.

Thirty years ago there was a debate in southern Africa, in which I took part, about whether it was possible to transplant ideas and beliefs from one cultural context to another.[23] If I am right in thinking that there are useful parallels between ages and cultures, then what one says about this issue will have a direct bearing on what one says about the possibility of handing on a tradition from one period of history to another.

In 1989 I attended a conference in the United States on 'indigenization', in which attention was focused on how Christianity was to be presented today to the descendants of those people whom Europeans encountered when they arrived in North America. The discussion seemed to me hardly to have moved forward at all from where we had been in 1959. The conference laughed dutifully when we were told about the mistakes made in attempting to indigenize Christianity among the Navajo; for example, about a church built to look like a tepee when the Navajo, apparently, live in hogans not tepees. But the fact remained that the conference was clearly assuming that indigenization was what WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) – or at any rate WAS, for they were not all Protestant – Christians did to aboriginals. No one said that indigenization is something that can, and perhaps should, be happening to Christianity at all times and in all places, in every culture and therefore (if eras are like cultures) in every era.

The very next Sunday I worshipped in a church in San Francisco. The priest's vestments were made from an Indian sari; he sat upon a Burmese elephant howdah – fortunately without the elephant; we danced an 'ancient Roman' dance (supposedly the kind of thing one sees them doing on all those friezes). On the surface it seemed an eclectic rite, drawing on every

age and every kind of culture – until I found myself asking myself, 'What kind of person has a coffee-table made from that Tibetan prayer-wheel which he brought back from last year's up-market holiday?' And then it dawned on me that this kind of worship was very specifically indigenous to fairly well-heeled, middle class, West Coast America. This impression was confirmed during the coffee break when a member of the congregation told me what a very homogeneous group they were: 'We are almost all in our thirties, university graduates, married with young children and have almost all recently been through a life- or career-change. We've left a job to do something new, or gotten married again, or moved here from some place else in the US.' It seems that Christianity will adapt itself to its context wherever that is. 'Indigenization', in other words, is inevitable. The pressing question is still the question to which Newman failed to provide a workable answer, How can one distinguish the legitimate development from the illegitimate?

The San Francisco example suggests that Christianity is more easily coloured by the context in which it finds itself than is obvious on the surface. Or, perhaps, it would be better to say that we do not think of our own attempts to indigenize the tradition we have received as in any way parallel to the sort of thing that happens when missionaries go to people of a quite other culture. And we can be equally unaware in other respects about what we do with the tradition.

John William Colenso, who was one of the first English scholars to undertake serious critical work on the Old Testament, was also the first Anglican bishop in Natal, South Africa. He got into trouble for both his critical scholarship and his missionary theology.[24] He undertook his Old Testament work because Zulus asked him why their own legends were to be regarded as heathen and bloodthirsty when so much of the biblical narrative was of exactly the same kind. So it was said that the bishop, who had gone to convert the Zulus, had himself been converted by them.

In 1865 Colenso delivered a paper to a literary society in London.[25] It was a reply to someone who had argued that Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis (published five years earlier) implied that missions were undesirable. Colenso's opponent believed that Darwin had proved that if a stronger and a weaker species existed side by side, the weaker one would become extinct. Missionaries, being of a superior race to those whom they were trying to convert, would actually be threatening them with extinction. Colenso stood the whole argument on its head. Christianity might have benefits to confer on Africans: Africans would certainly confer benefits on Christianity. The bishop pointed out that the thought of the ancient classical world had left its mark upon Christianity. So had the ideas of the Teutonic race. And he added, 'we know not what may be the special work of the African . . . we

cannot presume to assert that the human family will never be benefited by light reflected even from the thinkers of Zululand'.[26]

Colenso's has not been a common attitude, in his own day or since. Much more frequently Western theologians have preferred to sit in judgement on what people of other cultures have done with the tradition. They have taken it for granted that those things which have gone to make up the tradition which *they* have *received* are legitimate developments; adaptations made after they hand it on to others are not. They have forgotten that when Christianity was communicated to the Hellenistic world, it was not the Jewish Christians who decided which were the legitimate and which the illegitimate ways of expressing Christian truths in terms of Greek thought. That was hammered out over the centuries by Hellenistic Christians themselves. Perhaps – if we remember the parallel between cross-cultural transmission and historical transmission of ideas – that ought to remind us that we cannot always simply be bound by the unchanging past: we may have to accept responsibility for interpreting the tradition to our own age in our own way.

A case in point

The African continent has produced a large number of independent African churches and religious movements. A great deal has been written about how far they have really been thinly disguised political movements, particularly in the colonial era, how far they are indigenous forms of Christianity, and how far they are syncretistic and owe as much to other religious traditions as to Christianity. The argument is complicated by the fact that those who have written on the subject have not, for the most part, been African themselves but have written from the perspective of Western cultural assumptions about Africa. In the nineteenth century, as the attitude of Bishop Colenso's opponent shows, the assumption was that Africans were inferior, that their culture had little value, that Christian missions had nothing to learn and everything to give. When I was first ordained I knew an old African priest who, before celebrating the eucharist, used to spend a little while contorting his fingers into a particularly clawlike shape. Tactful enquiry revealed that he had been taught how to take services by a white missionary of an earlier and much more autocratic generation. That missionary had been a martyr to arthritis: the stigmata of arthritis had become part of the tradition which must never be changed.

African scholars, Christian no less than non-Christian, have written trenchantly about the history of Christianity on their continent. They are well aware of the horrors of cultural as well as political imperialism, of which the story of the old African priest is a trivial example. Cultural arrogance at a much more serious level has all too often been a feature of Christian missions in Africa. For Christians the 1960s, with the growth of real political independence, was a period in which they found themselves having to express a peculiarly difficult ambivalence – of gratitude for Christian faith coupled with resentment of colonial arrogance.[27] In the same period it became fashionable for historians of Africa, Western as well as African, to represent the missionaries as the chief agents of colonialism.

So bleak is the picture that it is surprising to discover how large and how rapidly growing the Christian population of Africa now is. But this is not precisely the Christianity of the missionaries. Africa has made Christianity its own, clothed it in thought forms, imagery, words and ideas, which are African. Christianity has survived; it has also changed and developed. And it is not even easy to tell how far it has changed. Few people can be both

sufficiently deeply immersed in two cultures, and at the same time sufficiently detached from both, to make an accurate judgement.

It would be interesting as well as valuable to trace the way in which Western European assessments of African Christianity have themselves changed and developed over the years. In a paper of this size, however, it is really only possible to begin some appreciation of these changes by looking at the work of one scholar, a white South African Dutch Reformed theologian, G.C. Oosthuizen, who over the years has attempted to assess how far African religious movements are, in fact, an indigenized form of Christianity. Oosthuizen has written a good deal about these movements, over a period of some three decades, and about the Nazareth Movement of Isaiah Shembe, in particular.

Shembe's movement was founded in the second decade of this century. He was himself a minister of the African Native Baptist Church, and the healing ministry he had exercised in that capacity seems to have become the central feature of the Church of the Nazirites of which he was the founder and leader. Western Christians describing Isaiah Shembe in the 1920s and '30s used such terms as 'scurrilous fanatic' and suspected him, entirely wrongly as far as one can determine, of being politically subversive.[28] Language of this kind was typical of the way in which white ecclesiastics viewed the independent movements. When the South African General Missionary Conference met for the first time in 1904, one participant had described them as 'a carnal Christianity' which sought privileges while shirking responsibility.[29] And the conference itself adopted a resolution deploring the lack of Christian comity, the low morals and lax discipline, and the mistrust of white men exhibited by such African bodies.[30]

When Oosthuizen began to write about these independent movements in the 1960s, Western attitudes to independent African religious movements had become a good deal more sympathetic and more sophisticated than those earlier judgements. Bengt Sundkler, a Swedish missiologist, had already written a well-known study of them, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*.[31] David Barrett was to publish his *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements*[32] before the decade was out. And in the atmosphere of the 1960s a new sympathy for these African movements was emerging. Indeed, one of Oosthuizen's articles was a rebuke to those whom he thought too inclined to lean over backwards to be sympathetic. In this article Oosthuizen quite deliberately adopted the role of the Western guardian of the Christian tradition. He was trying to judge what was being done to the tradition by those in another culture to whom it had passed and to assess the orthodoxy of the new religious movements' teaching from the viewpoint of classical Western (and Calvinist) theology. It seemed

to him that the Nazirites, for example, were ignoring certain important theological issues.

Oosthuizen wrote, in what still seem to be harsh and judgemental terms:

> To [the Nazirites] Jesus Christ came as a white, now he came as a black, in the flesh, through Shembe . . . Here the black Christ dogma is intensely developed. Here is a messiah without a cross.[33]

The indigenous movements as a whole he described as 'post-Christian, one may even add anti-Christian, cult communities'.[34]

It is interesting to compare those remarks of Oosthuizen's with something written by him 15 years later and in a context in which he was trying to assess the importance of the African independent religious movements in their own terms, rather than in terms of the norms of Western theology. In 1991 there appeared a volume on Afro-Christian religion of which Oosthuizen was co-editor and in which he said:

> The A[frican] I[ndependent] C[hurches] are not carbon copies of western-orientated churches. They fulfil a tremendous need, i.e. to make Christianity relevant, to counteract the de-Africanization process. A strong community spirit is evident in the AIC. The over-intellectualized, over-institutionalized churches do not appeal to those Africans who are still near to their traditional roots. When they can pray, dance (to the sound of the drum), sing, testify, witness, confess; when they are allowed to revere their ancestors and that a symbolic union with them could freely be maintained; when physical, spiritual and psychical healing take a prominent place; when the sense of community is strengthened, religion becomes a dynamic force.[35]

And again:

> As far as the indigenous churches are concerned, we are dealing here with a largely Africanized *corpus christianum*.[36]

It seems clear that Oosthuizen is willing to understand at least some of the independent movements as genuinely indigenized forms of Christianity. It is significant that his remark about the place of the ancestors in these movements is relatively sympathetic. It has been more common for anyone with a conventional Western Christian outlook to regard the veneration of the ancestors as immediate evidence of syncretism.

It is tempting to say that Oosthuizen's approach to African Christianity has modified over the years and become more sympathetic as his knowledge and understanding of the movements has grown. That would also suit my thesis very conventiently. But reality is seldom as neat and simple as that – and it would be unfair to Oosthuizen, in any case.

Oosthuizen has written a good deal about African Independent Churches,

including a serious and detailed treatment of the hymns used in Shembe's movement.[37] He analysed Shembe's hymns as the 'catechism' of the movement and found the theology sadly defective in traditional Christian terms. Almost ten years later his book came under attack from Sundkler himself.[38] (Some of Sundkler's criticisms of Oosthuizen seem so inexplicably intemperate as to suggest that there was some personal animus involved.[39]) What was really at issue was whether Shembe's movement could fairly be described as 'messianic' – were Shembe's followers, in fact, claiming that he was 'a black Christ'. By 1976 Sundkler was suggesting that the supposedly apostate language of 'black Messianism' was really shaped by the experiences of colonialism.[40] And it may well be that he was correct about this and that the language really expresses a longing for a God who is, as the Nazirites themselves say, 'not beyond the ocean but here in the midst of us' – 'Immanuel', in other words.

By this time, however, yet another new factor had become part of the already complex issue. The World Council of Churches had begun to regard independent African religious movements as churches which might become part of its own organization. The *Église de Jésus Christ par le Prophète Simon Kimbangu*, founded in the Belgian Congo in the 1920s, is a member of the World Council. That fact cannot be construed as implying that the Council regards Kimbanguist theology as orthodox or acceptable, for it has always insisted that it does not make judgements of that kind. Nevertheless, it does seem to suggest that independent African bodies are ceasing to be external objects to be studied and are coming to be thought of as insiders. In the same period the South African Council of Churches began to take a similar interest in local independent churches, including the Nazirites. And this, in turn, has worried conservative Christians who regard ecumenism as an embodiment of sloppy liberalism.

The most vigorous defender of Oosthuizen's original assessment of the Nazirites seems to share this view. He believes that the Nazirites are, in fact, a syncretistic movement influenced by Hinduism through the ideas of South African theosophists. And he seems to be anxious to maintain the view that the prevailing ecumenical tendency to treat Shembe's followers as an indigenous African form of Christianity is really a thinly disguised missionary imperialism which the Nazirites themselves reject.[41]

Faithful transmission follows from personal understanding

It has seemed worth telling this story because it is a reminder that debates about tradition and cross-cultural transmission are seldom simple, straightforward discussions of academic issues. Political circumstances, personal prejudices, psychological factors, all play their part. And that means that, if we intend to accept the challenge to interpret the tradition for our own day and age, we have to be extremely careful to free ourselves from such predisposing factors. It is very difficult indeed to have an unconditioned view of either history or culture.

One factor in the story seems undeniable: both Sundkler and Oosthuizen, in spite of their differences, came to understand the pressures that had shaped the independent African religious movements in a manner of which missionaries earlier in the century had been simply incapable. They did so because they had worked among the people about whose beliefs they wrote, in a way which allowed for closer, more open contact, on more equal terms, between them and those people so that the context in which the new ideas had developed could be understood. It would have been an over-simplification to say that Oosthuizen adopted a more favourable view of the African religious movements as he came to know them better. There is, however, a sense in which it is true that Western Christians, as a whole, have come to a more sympathetic assessment of the religious ideas of African people as they have come to understand their history better.

For ideas are not entities, like chemical substances, existing and interacting in their own right. Newman, in his *Essay*, recognized this but then proceeded to write anthropomorphically of ideas as 'enterprising, engrossing, imperious, more or less incompatible with the rest, and rallying followers or rousing foes'.[42] He had just said that the development of an idea is 'carried on through individuals and bodies of men; it employs their minds as instruments, and depends upon them while it uses them'. But those words had already implied that the ideas were capable of an independent existence since they 'employ' human minds, and Newman very soon began to write as if an idea literally possessed a life of its own. But ideas do *not* have an existence independent of institutions and persons. It is persons who exist, who develop ideas and propagate them. It is persons who hand ideas on to other persons,

sometimes across cultural boundaries, sometimes across boundaries between one era and another.

In other words, there is not really one enormous gulf between first-century Palestine and twentieth-century Europe or Africa, but a continuum of persons who may actually be able to bridge the temporal or cultural gaps by their patience and sympathy, by coming to know and understand the circumstances that exist on the other side of the gap. And it is when people on one side of a gap are willing to trust those on the other, rather than by teeth-gritting determination to preserve some unyielding 'tradition', that there is continuity. The difficulty of judging when the tradition has successfully crossed cultural divides, and the enormously complicated combination of factors which may come into play in trying to make such a judgement, ought to warn us against facile claims that we know what the unalterable tradition is.

The recipients of tradition are the only proper judges of legitimate development

If Harnack was right in maintaining that ideas have to change if they are to retain, under differing historical forms, a permanent validity[43]; and if it is not possible to make accurate judgements about when developments are legitimate and when they are not; then the only possibility open to us is to trust those who believe to pass on their faith and to trust those who receive it to become believers in their turn.

The fact that the gulf between one culture and another can be bridged by persons may be an indication that Stanley was right and that we will only understand the history of ideas and opinions by studying the people who held them. And that must be an important part of the process of understanding tradition. For, if there is a parallel between the passing of the tradition from one culture to another and the passing of the tradition from one age to another; and if the process of coming to know and understand the people who stand on the other side of a cultural gap is one of the ways by which the passage of the tradition is assisted; then the equivalent in the passing of the tradition from one age to another will be getting to know the historical context of that other age and thus understanding the people who lived by the tradition before us.

Stanley's preference for people over doctrines, as the stuff of ecclesiastical history, was essentially simple. He believed that one who had steeped himself in the pictures of the catacombs, and had become familiar with 'the barbarous style of the sculptures, the bad spelling, the coarse engraving of the epitaphs' was 'nearer to the thoughts of the early Church than he who has learned by heart the most elaborate treatise even of Tertullian or of Origen'.[44]

And, of course, one might have expected this kind of thing from Thomas Arnold's star pupil in that Broad Church – undogmatic – vale of soul-making, Rugby School. If one believes that tradition is important to Christianity, then one has to concern oneself with the *passage* of ideas. One needs something rather more sophisticated than Stanley's romantic picture of the semi-literate carver in the catacombs.

Twenty years younger than Stanley, and therefore part of an entirely different, and much more self-consciously professional historian's world, was Lord Acton. His own inaugural was a model of what an inaugural should be,

surveying the state of the discipline, declaring the new professor's interests, and describing how he believed the subject should be taught.[45] Above all he understood the relationship between the Christian tradition and history, for he perceived that *believing both requires and creates the tradition*.

John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton was related to half the nobility of Europe and his English as well as his continental ancestors had been Roman Catholics. The great historian Ignaz Döllinger, in Munich, had assumed personal responsibility for his education as a young man. For a brief period Acton was a Whig M.P. but practical politics was never what interested him most though he was to become an ardent admirer of Gladstone, who persuaded the queen to make him a peer. But before entering parliament, Acton had taken over the editorship of the journal called *The Rambler* which already had something of a reputation as a liberal ecclesiastical gadfly. He thus commenced his real career as a thinker and writer whose principal interest was the Roman Catholic Church and its place and influence in the world. He found himself in conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities more or less until the end of his life. He was extremely unhappy with the promulgation of the doctrine of the immaculate conception in 1854 and the *Syllabus of Errors* of 1864. And he went to Rome in 1869 to organize opposition to those who were working for the declaration of papal infallibility at the planned Vatican Council. Thereafter he found himself in a peculiarly difficult position but he was never anything other than a faithful Roman Catholic. He became the regius professor of modern history at Cambridge in 1895 and was responsible for the planning of the Cambridge Modern History, though he died in 1902, before the greater part of it was ever written.

It was probably from Döllinger, who had taught him history, and not from Newman, with whom he had once worked, that Acton first learnt the significance of development, though he came in the end to be suspicious of both men. While Newman was interested in the metaphysical coherence of the dogmatic system and in defining how it might develop and adapt, Acton maintained that Christianity was essentially a *history*. He was interested in the actual facts of history as they related to the development of doctrine. The real test for the truth of dogma, he thought, is whether it is supported by historical evidence, and not whether it fits neatly into a metaphysical scheme. Moreover, Acton's belief that the essence of a thing lay in its history did not apply to Christianity alone. He thought that the history of liberty, his great love, exemplified it also. One would understand the necessity of maintaining freedom, not by thinking about one or other of the many possible definitions of liberty, but by studying the history of the struggle to be free.[46]

The only test is the test of integrity

I have a kind of instinctive sympathy with this belief that the truth of Christianity is bound up with its history. At the same time I recognize that Acton never seems to have arrived at a clear statement of just how history and truth are related to one another. *Prima facie*, a conviction that Christianity is primarily a history would lead one to expect him to be an advocate of development and change. But in fact Acton was, in this respect, more conservative than the exponents of papal infallibility. He was uneasy about the dogma of the immaculate conception because it seemed to him that it had never been given, in earlier periods of history, anything approaching the status of a divinely revealed truth.[47] That seems tantamount to saying that new formulations could never be legitimately introduced into the tradition.

On the other hand, it is well known that Acton believed that it was the historian's duty to judge the morality of the people and institutions about which he wrote. This was bound up closely with his moral passion for freedom. He was as unhappy with the concept of the sovereign will of the people as with the dogma of papal infallibility,[48] and his hatred of ecclesiastical authoritarianism, as of political tyranny, sprang from his belief that even the most exalted authority must be subject to moral law. The historian, he believed, must not accept the moral standards of the age he is considering: integrity demands that one maintain one's own moral standards. One must not, therefore, seek to excuse the inquisition on the grounds that they had a different perception of morality then. And that seems to imply that morality might have developed since the sixteenth century.

Above all, of course, Acton does not seem to have considered the possibility that the development might be of so radical a kind as to make it impossible to judge its legitimacy. Within his own experience, and in terms of the judgements he had had to make, it always had seemed possible to tell whether an idea had altered between one age and another. Nevertheless, he perceived what is probably the most important thing of all, that the essence of Christianity is in its history. What he was really concerned about seems to have been integrity, a kind of moral wholeness. Because he was a good historian he knew that tradition must develop, but it should develop in a way that was integrated with its past, was not a contradiction of what had gone before, was morally in line with the values for which the tradition stood, and he preferred freedom to think above the absolutism of the autocrats.

Trying to adopt Acton's approach will not deliver us from the tension of living between those who want the tradition continually to adapt to every new fashion and those who want it not to change at all lest it lose something precious. But his values will tell us when there are arguments – and tactics – that we must not use because they are lacking in integrity. And adopting his view of Christianity as primarily a *history* might enable us to assess more accurately some of the ideas which we have inherited and thus free us from some of the assumptions that make it difficult for us to interpret the tradition for our own age.

The easiest way to explain what I mean is, I think, to take a specific example. Some years ago a Roman Catholic priest, who was himself in favour of the ordination of women to the priesthood, though I was not, took me into the library of the local seminary and over to the section on sacramental theology. And then we went from book to book, which he got down from the shelves, and opened up for me at the pages that dealt with ordination. Each time, when he had found the relevant pages, he handed me the book for me to read for myself. In none of them was there any theological discussion at all about who could be ordained, or what constituted the kind of person who was *capable* of receiving the sacrament of orders. Each time there was the same chilling list of those who might not be ordained: unbaptized males, mentally defective males, minors, eunuchs – and women. Gradually the implicit point sank in: these people were incapable of receiving the priesthood because they were all defective males.

It might be possible, I thought, to understand how a very primitive physiology might come to the conclusion that women were defective men. But if that is what the tradition had really been based on then it would be difficult for us to accept, since we plainly do not believe that what makes a woman a woman is some kind of defect.

Indeed it seemed that the implicit argument was really about whether women are proper 'matter' for the sacrament of orders. (I am not really happy about seeing it like that since it devalues human beings to the level of things. But that is the shape imposed upon the discussion by those who wish to insist that there is somehow a different kind of humanity involved in being female.) In that case it is a discussion similar to the one about whether one can use yam bread and pineapple juice in the eucharist instead of bread and wine. The rubric after the eucharistic rite in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer says that it doesn't matter what kind of bread is used provided that it is 'the best and purest Wheat bread that conveniently may be gotten'. If there is a genuine parallel, then we might say that the tradition is really insisting that the 'matter' to be used in ordination is the best and purest kind of human being that may conveniently be gotten. With their

limited understanding of human nature, earlier generations of Christians thought that that excluded women. Now, with our fuller understanding, we may feel obliged to say that we are not ordaining the best and purest (in the sense of the fullest) representation of humanity if we exclude women from the priesthood. In that case to ordain women to the priesthood would hardly seem to be a matter of breaking with tradition so much as restating the essential truth of it in terms of the culture in which we now live. And it does not seem to me that anyone other than ourselves is in any position to understand that culture.

Notes

[1] The paper is based on an inaugural lecture, given in the University of Oxford on 14 May 1992.

[2] The portrait hangs in Room 6 of the Examination Schools.

[3] A.P. Stanley, *The Life and Letters of Thomas Arnold*, 2 vols, London 1844.

[4] 'Mr Jowett and Oxford Liberalism', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 161 (1897) p 723.

[5] W.H. Bennett, 'Moses', in J. Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible Dealing with its Language, Literature and Contents including the Biblical Theology*, 7th Impression, Edinburgh 1909, p 447.

[6] B.M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: A Survey from Coleridge to Gore*, rev. edn., London 1980, p 246.

[7] A.P. Stanley, *Three Introductory Lectures on the Study of Ecclesiastical History*, Oxford 1857, pp 33f.

[8] Christ Church, Oxford: Muniment Room: Papers relating to the Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History: Register of Certificates, I: autograph notes by Stanley at the back of the register, dated 10 June, 1858.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Stanley, p 35.

[11] Ibid., p 39.

[12] O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2 vols, London 1970, ii, p 46.

[13] J.H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, London 1845.

[14] O. Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, 2nd edn, Cambridge 1987, 191 and N. Lash, *Newman on Development: the search for an explanation in history*, London 1975, p 103.

[15] I. Ellis, 'Pusey and University Reform' in P. Butler (ed.), *Pusey Rediscovered*, London 1983, p 300.

[16] G.L. Prestige, *Life of Charles Gore*, London 1935, p 103.

[17] H.P. Liddon, *The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, 8th edn., London 1878, pp 454ff. and 469ff.

[18] Ibid., pp 432 & 435.

[19] Reported in *The Church Times*, 13 September 1991.

[20] A. von Harnack, *What is Christianity*, London 1901, pp 13f.

[21] E.g. W. Sanday, *The Life of Christ in Recent Research*, Oxford 1907, p 29.

[22] D. Nineham, 'Epilogue' in J. Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, London 1977, p 202.

[23] See P. Hinchliff, 'Letter from South Africa', *Theology*, lxvi, January 1959, pp 17ff.

[24] For a fuller treatment of Colenso's critical and theological ideas see P. Hinchliff, *John William Colenso, Bishop of Natal*, London 1964.

[25] Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand Johannesburg South Africa: Archives of the Church of the Province of South Africa AB223, MS lecture by Bishop Colenso on Missions to the Zulus.

[26] Quoted in P. Hinchliff, 'Ethics, Evolution and Biblical Criticism in the Thought of Benjamin Jowett and John William Colenso', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 37 (January 1986), pp 109f.

[27] See e.g. two very different types of article, V. Rakotoarimanana, 'The Problems of Reunion Negotiations in Africa Seen by a Malagasy Pastor', *Mid-Stream*, iv, Winter 1964, n.b. pp 36ff.; E.B. Idowu, 'The Predicament of the Church in Africa', in G.C. Baëta (ed.), *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, London 1968, pp 415ff.

[28] D. Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, London 1992, p 133.

[29] Minutes of the South African General Missionary Conference, speech by F. Bridgmen on 20 July 1904.

[30] Ibid., Resolutions, 20 July 1904.

[31] London 1948.

[32] Nairobi 1967.

[33] G.C. Oosthuizen, 'Independent African Churches: sects or spontaneous development?', *Ministry: A Quarterly Theological Review for Africa*, 5, April 1965, p 100.

[34] Ibid., p 99.

[35] G.C. Oosthuizen and I. Hexham (eds), *Afro-Christian Religion at the Grassroots in Southern Africa* (African Studies vol. 19), Leicester/Queenston/Lampeter 1991, p viiif.

[36] Ibid., p xiii.

[37] G.C. Oosthuizen, *The Theology of a South African Messiah*, London 1967.

[38] B. Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists*, London 1976, pp 191ff. & 328.

[39] E.g. ibid., p 306.

[40] Ibid., pp 310ff.

[41] G.C. Oosthuizen and I. Hexham (eds), p 371.

[42] Newman, p 38.

[43] See above p 14.

[44] Stanley, pp 51f.

[45] J.E.E. Dalberg-Acton, 'The Study of History' in *Lectures on Modern History* (ed. J.N. Figgis and R.V. Laurence), London 1912, pp 1ff.

[46] Acton, pp 12f.

[47] G. Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton: A study in conscience and politics*, Chicago and London 1952, p 26.

[48] Himmelfarb, p 73.